The Fourth Church Pulpit

THROUGH HELL AND HIGH WATER

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Luke 14:25-33
Numbers 14:1-10

"We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place."
Psalm 66:12 b,c (NRSV)

One of the good things about trouble — and it may be the only good thing — is that it is occasionally amusing to tell about after the fact. "Remember the time we were late and you were in such a big hurry you backed the station wagon into the side of the other car?" It was a long time before that was funny! "Remember when we missed the flight and sat all night in the airport in Biloxi and then the next day got diverted to Boston instead of New York." Each of us has examples of mishaps, crises which were dreadful at the time, and became funny later.

It was at the beginning of last week, on Tuesday to be precise, that I realized some of us at Fourth Church were experiencing the kind of trouble that had real potential for amusement in years ahead, although at the moment was no fun at all. I also realized that I simply had to return to a text which spoke directly to our situation. In fact I used the wonderful story of the spies and the report about giants ahead, and the people seeming like grasshoppers, in May of 1994, one day before we packed up this church and put it all in moving vans and transported it to an office building one block away while the building was being restored and re-created. The Monday before last we repacked it all — desks, books, computers, files, Sunday School equipment, nursery toys, pots and pans — loaded it on the moving vans and hauled it back into this building, which, according to our best plans, was to have been sitting here, gleaming, totally re-created, totally functional, ready to receive happy Presbyterian men, women, children and staff. It was on Tuesday morning. The boxes were all inside the building, more or less. But the building was not only not complete and functional and ready for us, it wasn't even close.

We did not have options. Our lease at our temporary location was up. The owners had graciously given us an extension, but we had to move.

Here at 126, our home, there was no reception area, no functioning doors, only a few working washrooms, no parking lot, and worst of all, no telephone. High-tech communications experts had assured us that it was a simple matter of shutting down one system and reactivating it at the building. Of course, no such thing happened on Monday, nor on Tuesday, nor on Wednesday. Worst of all, people who called the church heard a ring as if we simply weren't answering the phone. People became impatient, rightfully so. For three days the staff of Fourth Church seemed to have gone fishing.

In the meantime, our new air-conditioning system, which at first was not working when it was hot and humid, not only started but wouldn't stop, got stuck on "high," "wide open"; an arctic wind whistled through the building so that work spaces were at an uncomfortable 60 degrees, people were shivering, sitting at typewriters in hooded sweatshirts, stepping over boxes and piles of dirt looking for electrical outlets that work, searching futiley for a working telephone, shouting messages to one another from floor to floor, arguing over who last used the one cellular phone and ran down the battery.

It was sometime in the middle of that, that I started thinking again about that wonderful story in the 13th and 14th of chapter of Numbers.

The people of Israel are in the wilderness. Moses decides to send a reconnaissance party ahead to spy out the promised land. Twelve men are chosen. They perform their mission and return with a good news/bad news report.

The good news is that the land is flowing with milk and honey. The bad news is that there are people in there. Some big, strong people.

That's when they say the sentence which is one of my favorite Bible verses. The people in there are so strong and fierce and big — "we seemed like grasshoppers."

Then the real trouble starts. The people who are already unhappy with the food (the writer calls them The Congregation) get wind of the report and "raise a loud cry." In fact they cry all night — they are very critical of Moses and Aaron. "We should never have listened to you," they say. "We should have stayed in Egypt. At least we wouldn't be dying of hunger or feeling like lowly grasshoppers ... let's elect new leaders ... to take us back to Egyptian slavery which is not free, but neither is it dangerous."

Moses and Aaron — who keep looking like Don Hagerty and me last week — don't know what to do, so they fall on their faces before the whole congregation.

And then two remarkable men step up. Caleb and Joshua, two of the twelve spies. The ten saw insurmountable obstacles ahead. These two saw opportunity. It's a moment of passion and anger. Caleb and Joshua present a stunning alternative word. It's a simple word. "We can do it. It's a good land. It's where we belong! If the Lord is pleased with us, He will bring us into this land and give it to us."

The obstacles loomed so large for the ten that they were paralyzed, physically and also spiritually. Two people — not even the leaders — saw possibilities and were inspired and energized to push on because of the certainty that God was with them.

And so, patient members and friends of Fourth Presbyterian Church know that this project is underway, in spite of appearances, and nearing completion; that there are obstacles and hardships ahead but that we will arrive at our goal.

The fact is that this whole experience of facing obstacles which appear to be too large to overcome, this experience of feeling inadequate, unprepared, ill-equipped, not smart enough, or strong enough — feeling a little like a grasshopper — is not unfamiliar.

William Sloane Coffin writes:

> "Fear distorts truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world ... but by underestimating our ability to deal with them ... while love seeks truth, fear seeks safety." [*Courage to Love*, p. 60].

Gary Wills has written a book on leadership, *Certain Trumpets*, in which he describes popular examples of effective and ineffective leaders. Harriet Tubman was an effective leader. Born into slavery, she became physically strong and disciplined as a field hand. She escaped to the North and then returned to Maryland, and further South, time and time again, to help other slaves to escape. She was a pious woman with a deep and mature faith, and relied equally, Wills says, on the providence of God and her own incredible strength. Guided only by the North Star, hiding by day, traveling always at night, hunted by posses, dogs, her biggest challenge was persuading terrified fugitive slaves not to return to the tempting safety of their captivity. Her own brothers turned back out of fear. Later, Will reports, she grew impatient with that pattern, "brooked no departure from the ranks, pulled her gun and forced her companions into freedom." (see *Certain Trumpets*, p. 45.)

We live in a time of rising cynicism and lowering expectations. Having failed to win the war on poverty, we have decided to stop fighting, apparently concluding that there is not much, after all, that we can do about it. Having failed to resolve the crisis of health care and the fact that a growing percentage of the American people have no insurance and therefore no assurance of adequate care, we have apparently decided to quit trying and allow the market to be our political as well as moral guide. Every national magazine and newspaper has carried a feature in the past several months on the growing cynicism of the American people: our disenchantment with politics, mistrust of politicians, our disinterest in the possibility that something good might be accomplished in the political sphere. Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her fine new book, *Democracy On Trial*, calls it "the politics of mistrust."

We live in a cynical time and also a time of diminished hope. A college president friend of mine told me recently that it was his experience that entering freshmen have pretty much given up on the idealism we associate with youth. "They don't talk much about world peace, racial justice, ending hunger, or finding a cure for cancer much anymore.

What they say they want," he said, "is a piece of the financial pie. And," he added, "the most disturbing thing is that their parents approve of their lowered aspirations." Parents welcome the end of idealism with a sigh of relief.

We live in a cynical time when the obstacles confronting us seem so large, so intimidating, and the individual seems so powerless, so weak that reason dictates lowering our expectations and scurrying for security and safety.

Cynical times, but also very important, incredibly promising times. I was privileged some years ago to be in a small audience of people addressed by the distinguished philosopher, architect, futurist, Buckminster Fuller — who invented the geodesic dome and the phrase "spaceship earth." He was, at the time, a very old man. In fact, he died shortly after I heard him speak. Near the end of a remarkable and very provocative presentation, he began to talk about the future. I went home and wrote down what I remembered of what he said.

> "We are on the brink of an era of un-imaginable progress — we are capable of a peacefully-fulfilling human future. We know how to feed, clothe, and shelter humanity. Our problem," he said, "is that our technology, our resources and much of our creativity are still tied up perfecting our capacity to kill all life in thirty minutes."

In fact, on the day I prepared this the House voted to continue the B2 program, building bombers the Air Force and Pentagon don't want and say we don't need, at a potential cost of eighty billion dollars. At the end Fuller became theological.

> "God" he said, "is trying very hard to make a success out of humanity. Human beings," he said, "are sitting for final exams ... to determine whether or not they are a good invention. To survive, we must decide to survive." As he sat down, he said softly, "I hope you make it."

These are important times for our community, for our nation, for the human race. All the futurists know that we are living in the most extraordinary time in all of history: that the future will be one of enormous danger but also incredible promise.

The human challenge is to face that future with all the imagination and creativity and resourcefulness and determination we can muster. The imperative is to push and prod ourselves, our politicians, our scientists, our educators, religious leaders, our young people — to propel us into that future with idealism and optimism, not the moral and political defeatism, the pessimism, that paralyzes our culture.

Standing on the edge of the wilderness, afraid of the future, tempted to go back to the security of the past, God's people felt like grasshoppers. About five-hundred years later one of their poets wrote a beautiful Psalm. We don't know what exactly had occurred in the life of the nation to inspire the writer. Whatever it was — it was trouble — the future looked frightening. It reminded him of the old stories of the frightened children of Israel, his ancestors, tempted to return to the security of the past, afraid of what lie ahead. And he wrote:

> "We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place."

There is a stunning theological assertion in that. Nothing that happens, happens outside the providence and the love and care and creative potential of God. Nothing that happens, no accident, no defeat, no personal tragedy, happens outside of the scope of God's loving and redemptive activity. Even fire and water — "hell and high water" — are places where God is lovingly present.

That is the Christian Gospel: for us — who believe and trust in Jesus Christ, not a philosophical abstraction, not wishful thinking, but a reality. Jesus Christ is God's sign, God's promise, God's strong word of hope. Jesus Christ is God working in human history, in human life to bring healing and hope. Jesus Christ, crucified, is God creating a hopeful future for humankind — for you and me personally — even in the midst of death.

Because we claim his name — because we trust him — we Christians are always grateful for the past, always in love with the present and always optimistic about the future. We know a secret: whatever the future brings God will be in it. God will be in it for us and with us. God will be our strength, our hope, our home.

I have used this congregations's recent experience as a metaphor. We have been through hell and high water and God has brought us out, or, more accurately, is bringing us out, to a spacious place. The fact is that for some of us the future is frightening, not metaphorically, but actually. It's not inconvenience we face, it's chemotherapy, surgery, loss, fear. It's not minor nuisance — it's the prospect of unemployment, or uncertainty about our professional possibilities, or our relationships. It's not a small obstacle; it is, for some of us, the awareness of our own mortality, of the end of things that matter, of loss and grief. And for us the word is that God will be in the future: that God's love and compassion and power will work redemptively and creatively in whatever future lies ahead.

No one has ever thought more deeply nor written more elegantly about this than Frederick Buechner. Reflecting on his own journey, he wrote:

> "God speaks not just through the sounds we hear, but through the events in all their complexity and variety, through the harmonies and disharmonies and counterpoints of all that happens. Deep within history, as it gets written down in history books and newspapers, in the letters we write and in the diaries we keep, is sacred history, is God's purpose working itself out in ... human history and our separate histories." (The Sacred Journey, p.3, 4).

Through fire, through water you have brought us out to a spacious place. The promise is that God will be in our future, and that at the end of our journey is home. Amen.